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Setting, Characters and Diction in Fiction

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Abstract
Contemporary literary critics have focused more on particular issues from a specific limited number of works, leaving partially or completely unexplored some more general issues. "Setting, character and diction" analyses the interdependence between the three elements of fiction, with a special focus on the relationship between setting and characters, as well as setting and diction. It covers works of fiction from over the world, and brings out what those works have in common as far as setting, character and diction are concerned.
Keywords: setting, character, diction, fiction

Introduction

Setting and theme are integral and interrelated elements of fiction. Events in any work of fiction turn around patterns of ideas, which weave a whole work into a coherent and unified entity. Many scholars have attempted a definition of setting. Roberts and Jacobs define it as "the natural and artificial scenery of environment in which characters in literature live and move, together with the things they use"(229). These environments include, among others, the time of the day, conditions of the sun and clouds, weather, hills, valleys, trees, animals, as well as smell and sound, light, darkness, rain, or any other thing referring to or affecting the atmosphere or the mood of the narratives, or requiring additional sensory responses from the reader. In this respect, the setting of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* is not only Mr. Jones' farm. His regular drunkenness, due to which he often forgets to feed his animals on the farm, justifies the animals' search for a revolution, which is exactly triggered off one cold night. Therefore, the farm , the night, Mr. John's drunkenness, animals' hunger, determine the course of events in the novel, and become important elements of the novel's setting. But the most important components of setting are time and space.

Bourneuf and Ouellet see time as an element capable of changing the meaning of a book. They divide space or milieu into what they call a narrow space and a large space, and recognize the existence in contemporary fiction of a particularly hostile environment, which often limits the movements of characters to a strict minimum, and which is often narrow. The farm, which is the only spatial setting of Orwell's *Animal Farm*, is a good illustration of this type of space. Animals spend their whole life on that small farm, trying to fight energetically natural and human forces , but ending up not achieving any permanent improvement in their life. It is a general feature of the oppressive space to generate hatred or revolt in the mind of characters. An oppressive setting can take different forms: a refugee camp, a concentration camp, a besieged town, a police station, a desert, a prison, …In Antoine de Saint Exupery's *Vol de nuit*, for instance, the sky becomes so hostile to Fabien, the pilot, that even a struggle for survival against the challenging wind, night, desert and mountains fail: he disappears in thin air. Prison is an oppressive setting par excellence. Alex la Guma's *The Stone Country* provides relevant illustrations of the humiliations, moral, physical and psychological abuses which prisoners suffer under South African Apartheid regime. This article aims at establishing the relationship between setting and characters on the one hand, and setting and language on the other.

I. Setting and characters

In every literary work, characters respond to the influence of setting, with its political, social and ideological connotations. Bourneuf and Ouellet (99) observe that it is not by accident that the main characters of a work of fiction may be depicted passing always by the same streets of a small town: monotony, confusion, or even oppression, are often behind such scenarios. Characters in Eza Boto (Mongo Beti's) *Ville Cruelle* are put in a setting where they feel entrapped. The protagonist, Koumé, moves in no other place but a small and dreaded city, Tanga Sud. In the absence of physical walls to entrap an unsuspecting inhabitant, Tanga Sud's cruelty is materialized by its poverty and indifference, which still lead to the death of the protagonist, Koume. Bourneuf and Ouellet (99) see in the creation of such a character and such a setting the author's intention to imprison characters.

Richard Wright's *Native Son* is another illustration of the point. Bigger Thomas, the protagonist of the novel, behaves the way he does because of the helplessness of the whole racial biased institutional setting. The Whites' permanent suspicion and hatred of the African-Americans leave the latter dumped in dirty, old, and small apartments in the city, where they feel their misery more strongly and behave desperately and dangerously. Such is the setting which leads Mr. Bigger to murder unwillingly Mary Dalton . The African-Americans live in permanent fear of undeserved arrest, accusations and arbitrary killings whereas social and political institutions deliberately made them who they were:

> The white neighbor decided to limit the amount of education his black neighbor would receive, to segregate him residentially,…to restrict his participation in the professions and jobs, and to build up a vast, dense ideology of racial superiority that would justify any act of violence taken against him to defend white dominance; and further, to condition him to hope for little and to receive that little without rebelling (Xii, introduction).

Reactions consequent to the oppressive environment ranged from submissiveness to rebellion. The same oppressive background created by the white American after slavery abolition explains the invisibility of the protagonist of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Since the world in which he is living refuses to see him, he has found refuge in a dark hole from where he learns to steal light and power supply for survival ends.

Sometimes, an impossibility to change the setting is expressed through characters' aimless movements. In la Guma's *A Walk in the Night*, the main characters, victims of apartheid regime wander in the nights on the streets of District Six in Cape Town, South Africa. Their nights' endless walk symbolizes their inability to escape apartheid. Night surrounds their steps and renders fruitless efforts to fight the forces of oppression.

Unlike settings dominated by aimless movements, other settings may be convenient to movement. Bourneuf and Ouellet (104) observe that, in many works of fiction, characters' wish for growth and change starts with a travel, which may take them toward discovery, knowledge, possession, …According to the two critics, the wedding of Emma in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* is not only a movement toward her husband's house. It is also a growth toward womanhood and toward disillusionment. Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The Devil on the Cross*, involves a trip of the protagonist, Wariinga, from town to village. The change of place corresponds to a change in her life: from the life of exploitation to that of social justice championing. A similar symbolic movement leading characters to their growth is observed in Mongo Beti's *Mission Terminée*. Jean-Marie Medza makes a journey from the city to the village, with a view to bring back his uncle's run away wife. While in the village, Medza learns and embraces different aspects of his culture which he ignored while in town. His mission is like an initiation journey taking ignorance to knowledge, from childhood towards maturity.

But characters do not only grow out of movement, they also react, positively or negatively, to setting. Many literary works use night and darkness as favorite settings for privacy and anonymity. It is in the night darkness that characters in la Guma's *A walk in the Night* are pursued and try to hide, it is at night that Koumé (*Ville Cruelle*) attempts evasion from Tanga Sud, and it is at night that Okara's Okolo, the main character in *The voice,* leaves the village of Amatu.

Particular elements of nature can be used by writers as useful tools to describe the mood of the characters or events. Nights are chosen by Elechi Amadi (*The Concubine*) to be the setting of the deaths of both Madume and Ekueme, the consecutive husbands of Ihuoma. Sunny days and harmonious seasons characterize the first part of Achebe's Things Fall Apart when the Whites have not yet reached Umuofia to tear apart the community's tissues of unity and harmony.

Elements of nature can sometimes act as forces directing characters' life.

If we take the example of William Faulkner's "Dry September", we realize that after sixty-two rainless days, heat causes the protagonist of the story to feel more and more irritation. It is then that a false rumor circulates that a white woman has been raped by a black man, a fact which ignites rage and provokes his lynching, as if to demonstrate that, indeed, "the weather is enough to make a man do anything" (qtd. in Kennedy 52).

"Young Goodman Brown" by Nathaniel Hawthorne may be taken as another example. The narrative symbolically describes the negative impact of night and forest on a young good man. "He had taken a dreary road, darkened by all the gloomiest trees of the forest which barely stood aside to let the narrow path creep through" (175). As he moves deep into the forest, and in spite of his struggle against temptation, he finally loses his life companion, Faith, who had discreetly followed him into the dreary forest. After the loss of Faith, Young Goodman Brown's former fear gives way to a bold flight in the dark forest whose control stands beyond his power. It is then that he hears frightening voices:

> The whole forest was peopled with frightful sounds…while sometimes the wind tolled like a distant church bell, and sometimes gave a broad roar around the traveler, as if all nature were laughing him to scorn (180).

Light and darkness, i.e. good and evil, are in conflict. When darkness is at its peak (midnight), it is then that Mr. Brown gets separated from Faith. The deeper he moves into the forest at night, the greater changes he undergoes, and the bolder he becomes to do evil. The change he undergoes shows in his physical appearance: "in truth, all through the haunted forest, there could be nothing more frightful than the figure of Goodman Brown" (180). Ugliness becomes a visible sign of the invisible dehumanization which he underwent in the night journey. In obedience to an injunction from the forest tempter that "evil must be your only happiness" (182), he unscrupulously gives himself to immoral deeds. However, a change of temporal setting brings the conflict to its dénouement: at daybreak, the changed Young Goodman Brown finds himself back to the streets of his quiet and beautiful Salem village. *The Fall of the House of Usher* by Edgar Allan Poe typically

exemplifies how setting can reveal character. The falling house corresponds to the psychological devastation of the owner, Roderick Usher. Talking of the house, "its principal feature seemed to be that of an excessive antiquity. The discoloration of ages had been great "(qtd. in Roberts and Jacobs 245).It is not only the stone building of Usher which is in excessive decay, it is a general fall of the Usher's family, whose only survivor, Roderick Usher, is also in complete physical and psychological decadence.

II. Setting and Diction

Writers may express different adaptations of characters to setting through characters' special handling of language. According to Ngara, field of discourse, participants' background and status, and audience, are some of the most important factors influencing diction. In his words,

> …the subject is likely to influence, in some measure at least, the writer's choice of lexical items. Thus, in Achebe's *A Man of the People*, a book about politics, we meet a number of political catchwords, slogans and economic terms; while in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, a novel about a socialist revolution, we find many words referring to socialist ideas (20).

The subject matter referred to here emerges from the field of discourse of a literary work. Moreover, as the same critique goes on, the audience plays a role in the writer's language use by the fact that "he [the writer] may choose a tone of voice and words which show respect to his audience and to the subject or object of criticism, or he may employ a tone of voice and a set of words which are disparaging either to the victim or to both victim and audience" (22).

We shall illustrate the case with a few examples. *Anthills of the Savannah*, a political novel by Chinua Achebe, is set in a fictional state called Abazon. The result is that any African country feels itself concerned by the reality depicted in the novel and, at the same time, no politician will accuse the writer of attacking him personally. For this reason, Achebe allows himself to use sarcasm, calling for example the Honourable Commissioner for Information a "Commissioner for Words "(6-7), to criticize the poor quality of his work, which Achebe considers as consisting only of words. He also sees "HARMONEY HOTEL" (128) written in fluorescent shining letters where he expected to read "HARMONY HOTEL", to criticize the owner's exaggerated love of money. Achebe 's figurative handling of natural elements, the metaphorical names he gives to his characters, make *Anthills of the Savannah* comparable to Gabriel okara's *The Voice*.

Like *Anthills of the Savannah*, *The Voice* is a political novel. Okara uses in it symbolism, taking elements of comparison or reference from domains which he judges capable of reflecting the reality of life at Amatu and at Sologa of the Big One. Thus, people attribute Okolo's "incorrectness to the fact that he has spent much time on the river" (34). Water, of which rivers are made, is a symbol of life and purification. Okara's placing of Okolo on water symbolizes the latter's mission to bring people to a positive attitude to life. However, as a river keeps running, Okolo's message drifts away with the waves, unheard by the people it was intended to change. They misinterpret water, an element of purification, for an element of corruption, and therefore reject what was intended to bring sanity into their life.

With the intention of producing diverse emphatic effect in *The Voice*, Okara uses repetition, sensuous images and symbols, as in the following case on Okolo's first night in Sologa of the Big One: "Through the black black night Okolo walked, stumbled, walked, ….Okolo walked, stumbled, walked. His eyes shut and opened, shut and opened, expecting to see light in each opening, but none he saw in the black black night" (77).

The night, which is a symbol of confusion, is extremely black ("Black black"). In such a setting, when Okolo walks, he stumbles. He tries to pass the message, but people set for him obstacles. He opens his eyes only for him to realize the futility of his efforts. Black night, i.e. confusion and error, persist. Obiechina interprets Okara's use of metaphor as a device the writer resorts to "to give concreteness and body in the heavily oppressive moral environment he builds up"(170). In the morally oppressive environment where the novel is set, moral values are rejected in favor of erroneous conduct.

Among African-American writers, Ralph Ellison is peculiar in his association of setting and language. Because of his awareness and acceptance of his identity, "I am who I am" (218), the hero of Ellison's *Invisible Man* also accepts, through his metonymic association of Africa with yam, his African origin: "I yam what I am"(216). In addition, in spite of his blackness, he is offered a job at LIBERTY PAINTS, a white-dominated environment, ironically by a son of a radical racist. Ellison's wish to see America as a segregation free country emerges when he puts these human values of racial tolerance in an environment where one would expect the worst form of racial discrimination.

Writers consider characters' status, social roles and norms as important elements determining language appropriateness and decorum. Sheep, who are prototypes of blind obedience, are presented in *Animal Farm* with a peculiar way to put to silence other animals' urge to rebellion, bleating constantly "four legs good, two legs bad" (38) as a reminder of the distance which all animals have to keep between themselves and human beings -- who walk on two legs. But when Napoleon the pig and his prime minister Squealer turn into other animals' abusers and start walking on two legs, the sheep approve them through the bleating of a new motto:

"Four legs good, two legs better!". The sheep are used allegorically to represent the ignorant human beings, those who blindly execute the leaders decisions and praise them for their misdeeds. Unlike the sheep , Boxer the horse constantly says: "I will work harder" (19), a motto which comforts him in difficult moments, till the painful end of his life. Boxer's language corresponds to the main attribute associated with horses: hard work.

Even if a creative writer "…may talk of one thing in terms of another and thus make use of a completely different field of discourse from that which his subject matter naturally falls under", (Ngara 20), the language of fiction varies with domains. *Animal Farm*, a political novel, makes use of a diction appropriate to politics. The fact that Napoleon is given the title of "leader" (*Animal Farm* 46), that he has body guards (71), or that animals hoist the flag every morning (20), refer more to politics than to other domains of life. Similarly, Napoleon, the pig's name, corresponds to that of a great French leader, Napoleon I (Bonaparte). After the revolutionary overthrow of Mr. Jones, Napoleon the pig does not keep to the principles of equality and dignity of all animals. Instead, he cunningly seeks his own welfare to the detriment of other animals.

A novel with a different field of discourse would use lexical items different from the ones used *in Animal Farm*. When la Guma presents Elias Tekwane's trials in *In the Fog of the Season's End*, he depicts Tekwane's suffering with words capable of rendering the perfect image of a prisoner in pain. The oppressor (a white policeman, a prison guard, or even another prisoner) uses a tone and words which deprive the victim of his human dignity. In situations like these, the South African novelist Coetzee confesses to find with pain the right words to use. He resorts to allegory and metaphor, which in fact reflect his vision of a South African victim of apartheid. He is a humanist who looks upon apartheid with terror and pain, and who narrates stories "…in the person of a weak and wondering man who continually finds that words fail him" (Gallagher 121).

If a setting is oppressive, the writer may disguise himself behind certain types of narrators, often for his own safety. A writer may distance himself from his story by surrounding himself with so much anonymity that nobody will associate him with the story. Vumbi Yoka Mudimbe (*L'Ecart*) invents a narrator who is a simple editor of a document which was confided to him by a dying person. The subjective presentation of the book is due to its time of production, characterized by serious census over whatever was written about the writer's country, Congo. The author found it necessary to hide himself behind a dead narrator, for security reasons. Ferdinand Oyono does the same by presenting *Une Vie de Boy* as a diary of a houseboy, Toundi. The novelist's avowed role is only to translate the diary. But, unlike Mudimbe, Oyono establishes a distance between the place where the diary was written down (Cameroun) and the place where the writer dies (Spanish Guinea).The spatial shift symbolizes the protagonist's longing for change. In fact, Cameroon being a French colony, the humiliations which the indigenes endured sent some of them into exile to countries where life was considered as less harsh. Spanish Guinea was such a land of refuge in the view of many Cameroonians.

A typical African who is sent by the Whites for a mission against his fellow black men will deliberately resort to a coded language in order to still save his fellow brothers, as Chinua Achebe does it in *Arrow of God*. Likewise, prisoners are likely to devise a coded language through which they can insult or defensively deceive prison guards, as la Guma presents it in *The Stone Country*. More generally, oppressive settings, or contexts of interaction between characters of unequal social rank, call for a special handling of language.

Even if human beings are believed to know only a fragment of their lives, there are novelists whose presentation of events are panoramic. A novelist like Alex la Guma, who knew from experience prison life under the system of apartheid, or Anatole France, who lived the barbaric aspect of the French Revolution, are capable of offering to readers a panoramic view of events set in those historical and spatial settings. Eza Boto's *Ville Cruelle*, which develops the theme of degradation of African human, social and rural values, is set at the time of the Europeans' colonization of Africa. The setting where events take place is a white-dominated city, Tanga Sud. Peter Abrahams' *Tell Freedom*, in which the author tells his own humiliations and disappointments, is purposely set in the slums of Johannesburg during the 1920's , a setting where the blacks' dignity, their right for education and for equality with the Whites were denied by the ruling white majority. *Vol de nuit*, in which night is the time when Fabien's plane struggles to find orientation in spite of the fact that communication has already been cut between the ground and him, provides to Antoine de Saint Exupéry a good background for the development of the themes of human beings' limitations, and their survival through good will and responsibility. As for Charles dickens' *Hard Times*, set against the backdrop of the industrial revolution, it mainly develops the theme of the latter on social life in Europe.

Conclusion

Setting, viewed in its dimension of time and space, determines writers' treatment of such elements of fiction as plot, character, diction, theme, and point of view. While simplistic definitions would list time and space as the sole elements of setting, the latter encompasses broader concepts such as economic conditions, socio-political circumstances, institutions and ideologies, which influence the actions and behaviors of characters in fiction. This work has tried to examine the dynamics of relationship between setting, character and diction in fiction. It

brought out , with the help of various literary works, the intrinsic network linking internally various elements of fiction. For the sake of time and space, focus has been put on characters and on diction, hoping that the other elements will still soon get their due consideration.

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